

Succi, Chiara; Wieandt-Ledebur, Michaela

Article

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Walk the talk: soft skills' assessment of graduates

Chiara Succi

ESCP European – Torino Campus, Turin, Italy, and

Michaela Wieandt

ESCP Europe Wirtschaftshochschule Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Abstract

Purpose – A fast-changing environment entails several reflections about skills and attitudes required to face the increasing complexity brought by the “glocal, liquid and networked” world in which workers operate (Bauman, 2003; Clarke, 2017). In the literature, an increased attention has been devoted to the impact of interpersonal skills and personal characteristics on employability (Heckman and Kautz, 2012; Succi, 2019; Wheeler, 2016). In this context, the so-called soft skills become of crucial importance, but a lack of academic attention devoted to their development, and a deficit of companies in integrating soft skills in their selection, induction and training processes have been identified (Hurrell, 2016). The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory study has been designed to describe the tools in use to assess soft skills, during the recruitment process and those to develop soft skills of graduates, during their first years on the job. In January 2017, two symmetrical online questionnaires have been sent to 500 HR managers and 240 graduates of a European business school, in Italy and Germany.

Findings – Results show that graduates and managers describe differently the use of tools to develop graduates' soft skills. The large majority of HR managers indicate they offer formal training to young graduates and that they are involved in the performance appraisal sessions, while only 22 percent of students confirm they receive formal training and only 26 percent declare to be inserted in a performance appraisal process. Moreover, concerning the assessment of soft skills during the selection process, significant differences between Italian and German companies emerged.

Research limitations/implications – This research constitutes the first step to acknowledge the lack of initiatives devoted to soft skills development, despite their rising importance for the job market.

Practical implications – Findings allow initiating a discussion about a strategic topic in human resources management: whose responsibility is it to develop soft skills? Should graduates, higher education or companies fill the gap? The study can be extended to other types of higher education institutions, and a qualitative research could deepen the understanding of root causes of the differences identified.

Social implications – The impact on youth employment, reduction of labor skills mismatch and improvement of managerial practices could be interesting social implications of the study.

Originality/value – While previous research has predominantly focused on higher education executives and HR managers, this paper's contribution consists in involving young graduates in the reflection on employability.

Keywords Graduate employability, Soft skills, HRM practices, Assessment tools, Development methodologies

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

One of the most discussed and controversial debates within the current literature on graduate employability relates to the quality of students and their lack of soft/transferable skills, essential in today's labor market and necessary to increase individual employability (Clarke, 2017; Crossman and Clarke, 2010). The “blame game” has been going on for over three decades between employer groups and higher education with regards to the responsibility of



graduate employability. Employers have blamed and criticized higher education for not preparing students adequately for the current labor market, and thus continuously highlighting students' lack of transferable skills (Hurrell, 2016). Although, throughout the years, higher education institutions (HEIs) seem to have responded to this criticism and progressively addressed this issue, improvements in students' acquisition of transferable competences still seem to be missing. Accordingly, should the soft/transferable skills gap – identified by employers – be attributed to HEIs, graduates or employers themselves due to the adoption of inadequate recruitment and graduate development processes (Hurrell, 2016)? How can we measure soft skills effectively? Whose responsibility is it to develop soft skills? Should graduates, higher education or companies fill the gap?

This paper intends to describe the main practices of companies to assess and develop soft skills. Its main contribution consists in involving young graduates directly in the reflection on their employability and it constitutes a first step to acknowledge the lack of initiatives devoted to soft skills development, perceived by students, despite the rising importance for the job market.

The succeeding section provides a comprehensive definition of the so-called soft skills and shows the increased importance recorded in the literature and in the job market. Then, it describes the different practices, implemented by companies, to assess these “wicked competences” (Knight and Page, 2007). Finally, it outlines the methodologies adopted in organizational settings.

2. Soft skills importance for the job market

It has been argued that, in order to achieve a positional advantage, graduates need to develop and acquire a combination of skills, notably core/hard skills and transferable/soft skills (Clarke, 2017). It is important to note that, over the last decades, research has largely focused on the technical/hard skills and know-how required by the labor market (Balcar, 2016; Eshet, 2004), whereas only limited attention has been devoted to the investigation of soft/transferable competences (Ciappei and Cinque, 2014; Seligman, 2002). This is quite surprising, considering the importance of soft skills in relation to graduate employability. Archer and Davison (2008) pointed out that the International Employee Barometer survey confirmed the importance of soft skills amongst employers. They argue that employers attributed higher importance to soft skills compared to students' higher education qualifications. Similarly, the World Economic Forum identified 10 out of 16 “crucial proficiencies in the 21st century” to be related to employees' soft competencies (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017, p. 1). The following section will thus discuss the notion of soft skills, highlighting the inconsistency in scholars' attempts to define the concept.

There are different ways of defining and classifying “soft skills,” notably as life skills (WHO, 1993), transversal skills, generic competences as well as key competencies for a successful life, a well-functioning society (OECD, 2003, 2012) and lifelong learning (European Union, 2006). Life skills, social skills, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, transversal competences, social competences, and meta-competences, are commonly used to refer to the “emotional side” of human beings, in opposition to the intelligent quotient component related to hard skills (Delamare-Le Deist and Winterton, 2005; Shalini, 2013). According to Heckman and Kautz (2012, p. 451), “soft skills [are] personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences that are valued in the labor market, in school, and in many other domains [...]” They are “a mix of dispositions, understandings, attributes and practices” (Yorke, 2006, p. 4). Knight and Page (2007) describe them as wicked competences, as it is very difficult to define them because they can assume different forms in different contexts and they keep developing along the entire lifetime (Ciappei and Cinque, 2014).

A working definition we propose for this paper is taken from Haselberger *et al.* (2012) within the ModEs project (p. 67): “Soft Skills represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills. Soft skills help people to adapt and behave positively so that they can deal effectively with the challenges of their professional and everyday life.” In this instance, soft skills relate to a vast range of interpersonal and social qualities and competences, transferable across economic sectors and industries (Hurrell, 2016; Deloitte Access Economics, 2017). These soft skills include communication, teamwork, problem solving, critical and innovative thinking, creativity, self-confidence, ethical understanding, capacity of lifelong learning, the ability to cope with uncertainty, as well as the willingness to accept responsibility (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Clarke, 2017; Harvey, 2000; Kalfa and Taksa, 2015; Moore and Morton, 2017). The empirical study presented in this paper adopted the list of soft skills defined and extensively described by the ModEs European Project (Table I; Haselberger *et al.*, 2012).

It is argued that the acquisition of these soft skills allows students to better adapt to the organizational culture, take initiative and contribute to organizational success (Harvey, 2000). Similarly, emotional intelligence studies support the hypothesis that interpersonal skills are more likely to predict successful careers (Claxton *et al.*, 2016; Goleman, 1995;

Category	Skill	
Personal	1. Being committed to work – make a commitment to the organization and understand its specific characteristics	
	2. Being professionally ethical – take actions while bearing in mind the principles and ethics of the profession in daily activities	
	3. Being tolerant to stress – show endurance in complicated or stressful situations	
	4. Creativity/innovation skills – contribute new ideas to develop improvements in the products or services of the organization as well as in the activities performed in the job	
	5. Learning skills –provide a self-assessment of necessary knowledge (theoretical or practical) and take measures to acquire and implement this knowledge	
	6. Life balance skills – manage successfully the frequent conflicts between life and work	
	7. Self-awareness skills – grasp our real weaknesses and strengths	
	Social	8. Communication skills – transmit ideas, information and opinions clearly and convincingly, both verbally and in writing, while listening
		9. Conflict management and negotiation skills –conciliate different opinions to reach an agreement that satisfies everyone
		10. Contact network skills – develop, maintain and foster contacts
		11. Culture adaptability skills – carry out managerial and entrepreneurial processes in multicultural environments
		12. Leadership skills – motivate and guide others to get them to contribute effectively
		13. Team-work skills – to build relationships based on participation and cooperation with other people
Methodological	14. Adaptability to changes skills – redirect the course of action to meet goals in a new situation	
	15. Analysis skills – draw conclusions and forecasts for the future by acquiring relevant information from different sources	
	16. Continuous improvement skills – perform the activities, duties and responsibilities inherent to the job under quality standards and strive for excellence	
	17. Customer/user orientation skills – identify, understand and satisfy efficiently the needs of customers	
	18. Decision-making skills – make the decisions necessary to achieve objectives quickly and proactively+B18	
	19. Management skills – set goals and priorities through the selection and distribution of tasks and resources	
	20. Results orientation skills – make organizational efforts profitable while having always in mind the goals pursued	

Table I.
List of the 20 soft skills utilized in the study

Sources: Haselberger *et al.* (2012); Succi (2019)

Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008) and are necessary for the development of teamwork, the rapid pace of globalization, the capacity to dialogue in a cross-cultural environment, and the growing need to retain talent in organizations.

Various documents issued by the European Commission (EC, 2012a, b, 2013) as well as a numerous human resources experts (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009; ISFOL, 2012) pointed out that “soft skills” are closely connected with employability, particularly for young graduates entering the labor market. According to these documents, companies need to learn how to assess them effectively during the selection process and more opportunities should be given to young people to develop soft skills.

3. Soft skills assessment

Soft skills became increasingly important in the work place. However, they are not only difficult to define but also complex to assess as selection methods can cover a wide range of different constructs related to soft skills (Cook, 2016). According to research, the most popular selection method related to social and behavioral dimensions of employees’ skill sets is interviewing (Dipboye *et al.*, 2012). Looking at soft skill assessment practices, the vast majority of hiring managers use interviews in various forms (Cook, 2016; Hurrell, 2016; Ployhart *et al.*, 2006) despite the fact that the interview as a selection method has its shortcomings with regard to validity and to the many factors possibly influencing its course in a negative way (Barber *et al.*, 1994; Cook, 2016; Ployhart *et al.*, 2006; Johns *et al.*, 2007; Dipboye *et al.*, 2012). However, it is still “one of the most preferred and the most frequently used relative to all other selection procedures” (Dipboye *et al.*, 2012, p. 324). With regard to soft skill assessment, structured interviews correlate highly with applicants’ social skills and situational judgement (Cook, 2016, p. 83), while achievement tests “do not adequately capture” soft skills (Heckman and Kautz, 2012, p. 451). Moreover, interviews are widely used when recruiting university graduates (Johns *et al.*, 2007; Keenan, 1995).

In graduate selection, group interactions, role plays and presentations are also frequently used selection methods, often applied in assessment centers for graduate selection (Cook, 2016; Johns *et al.*, 2007; Keenan, 1995). In addition, Johns *et al.* (2007) refer to personality tests as instrument for selecting graduates.

Another instrument that gained importance in graduate recruitment in the last years is video interviewing, especially for international companies who recruit worldwide. Recruiters widely use it in the initial stages of high volume recruitment campaigns to identify strong candidates for later stages of the selection process. Of course, video interviews enable companies to process larger scales of applications and help to save costs and time (Beagrie, 2015). An attractive industry for university graduates, especially from business schools is management consulting. Here, case study interviews are widely used for assessing important soft skills like problem solving, communication and customer orientation (Armbrüster, 2004).

Despite the vast and growing body of research about applicants’ reactions to selection methods (Gilliland and Steiner, 2012), there is relatively small research on graduates’ experience. Johns *et al.* (2007) report that graduates do not rate selection methods connected to soft skills like communication, team work and critical thinking as useful and important as employers when selecting graduates. These were interviews, personality tests, group discussion and presentation. This may be due to the fact that graduates still underestimate the meaning of soft skills or due to employers’ and candidates’ different perceptions of selection methods (Cook, 2016; Dipboye *et al.*, 2012).

4. Soft skills development

Now more than ever, individuals and organizations must continuously gain knowledge and develop a new set of skills to remain competitive (Sheikh, 2008). Thus, it is important to

identify the learning/training methodologies available to achieve the objective. “With the ever-changing technological advances of our time and the continual development of learning theories, there are now more options than ever before in how we train people” (Martin *et al.*, 2014, p. 12). Several classifications can be retrieved in the literature considering different learning goals, different content, different audiences or different settings (Bloom *et al.*, 1964; Hackathornal *et al.*, 2011; Lonergan, 1990; Merrill, 1994).

Here, the analysis is focused only on the development of soft skills, trying to outline a list of the most appropriate methodologies in use. It is important to distinguish between training/learning in organizations and teaching in K-12 grades or taking courses in postsecondary or continuing education (Martin *et al.*, 2014).

Soft skills are developed through formal and informal activities. Universities recognize formal skill development activities in the classroom and residence halls through ECTS academic credits. The informal skill development activities are non-academic and non-recognized, although the structure of the courses is similar to the previous ones. Soft skills development in the classroom can be performed using mini-curricula, programs, workshops, labs, training sessions, projects, company visits and study journey, and individual or group tasks. “Universities and higher education institutions, as part of the education system, should not educate students only in narrow, knowledge-based specializations, but must go further, seeking the integral education of the person. [...] Efforts need to be concentrated on developing transversal skills, or soft skills [...]. In order to develop these skills, teaching is not enough: an appropriate environment is also required. For example, extra-curricular activities, whether organized in a university/college/institute environment, ranging from volunteering, culture and the arts, to sports and leisure activities, help develop soft skills and nurture talents” (EC, 2013, p. 36).

Companies, on the other hand, are characterized by different needs (Martin *et al.*, 2014) and they experimented, over time, different mix of educational methodologies and development strategies (Conger and Xin, 2000, p. 96). Learning has to be part of every-day activities. It is important to set participants in a collaborative/competitive environment and they can learn from each other and through the exposure to authentic, complex and real-life problems. Soft skill learning is “meaningful,” since it is a willful, intentional, active, conscious, constructive and socially mediated practice that includes reciprocal intention-action-reflection activities. Educational initiatives need to be seen not as a fake reality but as part of the wider culture and as an embodiment of a culture’s way of life (Christensen *et al.*, 1992). It is widespread the 70:20:10 learning model, where it is considered that 70 percent is learned informally, on the job, experience based, and through stretch projects and international mobility; 20 percent occurs thanks to coaching and mentoring, and developing through others’ feedbacks and performance appraisal processes; finally, 10 percent through formal learning interventions and structured courses (Kajewski and Madsen, 2013).

5. Methodology and research design

The literature review shows a growing interest in soft skills, a difficulty of academic programs to develop them, and the need of companies/employers to “measure” them and to equip graduates with the right skills to face a volatile and complex job market.

This research has thus been designed to comprehend how, on one side, employers perceive the importance of soft skills and structure their recruitment and development processes, and, on the other side, how students/recent graduates perceive the importance of soft skills in finding a job and for future career development. An exploratory study has been developed to achieve the research objectives, combining quantitative (i.e. surveys) and qualitative (i.e. focus groups and interviews) research methods. First, a pilot study has been conducted in Italy followed by the main empirical study conducted both in Italy and Germany. A business school

was selected for the data collection. The school is based in six European countries, counts more than 4,500 students a year in degree programs, and collaborates on a regular basis with a large number of multinational companies.

The first phase of the research was carried out in February 2016 and was intended to verify the interest of the corporate community on the topic and to create a common framework to build further analysis. A pilot survey was sent to a group of Italian HR managers on the occasion of the career day of the business school. Results of the pilot study confirmed that the development of soft skills is a top priority on the agenda of Italian HR managers and, in particular, teamwork, communication, results orientation and learning skills (see Table I) were considered primary skills when assessing and looking to employ young graduates. In their opinion, universities should encourage students to face a wider variety of situations (Succi, 2019). They need to be able to step out of their comfort zone, develop cognitive skills and ultimately apply what they have learned, to work with others and to solve problems.

Following the pilot study with Italian HR managers, the authors decided to investigate the topic more in details and on a larger scale. The second phase of the research was conducted in the period between January and June 2017, with the goal to describe main practices in soft skills assessment and development. Other countries, in which the school is present, in particular Germany, have been included in the study. The enlarged target group was now composed by two populations. On one side, it involved 1,200 currently enrolled masters' students and recent graduates (i.e. no more than two years of experience). On the other side, 800 HR managers were selected, within the network of the school. The e-mail questionnaire was sent out to the target groups for the first time in March 2017, followed by an intense recall phase during the months of April and May.

The questionnaire sent out to employers and students/graduates via e-mail was divided into four subsections: importance and ranking of soft skills; activities to assess soft skills during the recruitment process; learning methodologies to develop soft skills in the induction phase; and demographic information, in order to address the following research questions:

- RQ1.* Which are the main instruments, used by companies, to assess soft skills in the recruitment process?
- RQ2.* Which are the most common methodologies, used by companies, to develop soft skills in young graduates?
- RQ3.* Is there a difference between students/graduates experiences and HR managers' declared practices?

The first section of the questionnaire investigated the importance of soft skills compared to hard skills and proposed the list of 20 soft skills (Table I), divided in three categories, to measure the perceived importance of each of them.

Then, companies were asked to indicate the "assessment instruments" (e.g. observation of group interaction, personality tests, role play/simulation) used in the recruitment process, to test soft skills and the "type of activities" (e.g. coaching, performance appraisal, formal training) they offer to new hires to develop their soft skills in the first two years with the company. Students and graduates were also questioned about the "assessment instruments" in the application process, while only graduates were interrogated regarding the "type of activities" to develop soft skills.

The last section of the questionnaire focused on the collection of demographic data of employers and the companies in which they operate as well as of students' and graduates' work experience. In particular, researchers asked to indicate the area of business, the size and country of the headquarter of each company, plus their level of internationalization.

On the other side, students, and especially graduates, were required to describe in detail the companies of their previous work placement as well as their current job. The online questionnaire was distributed simultaneously to the two populations investigating the same issues. A response rate of 21 percent was obtained with 425 people participating in the study and 300 completing the questionnaire, among which 169 students/graduates and 131 employers.

Description of the sample

Employers participating in the survey were mainly Italian (50 percent) and German (35 percent), and equally distributed between women and men. The large majority (42 percent) is middle or senior managers, and 20 percent of respondents hold a CEO or executive position. In total, 35 percent of respondents were born in the seventies and 33 percent in the eighties (the others are born before 1970). The majority of employers are working for big companies 36 percent (more than 10.000 employees) with international activities (13 percent is headquartered in the USA). Sectors in which companies operate are mainly IT (26 percent), finance (23 percent), insurance and consulting (23 percent), industry and production (16 percent), and FMCG (12 percent).

The other sample is formed by 78 percent of students and by 22 percent of recent graduates. They come mainly from Italy (37 percent) and Germany (46 percent) and from other European countries (17 percent). There is a slight majority of male participants (59 percent). Furthermore, the majority of participating students undertook at least one internship and 44 percent of students have done more than three internships. Almost all participating students have international experience and they either worked in large companies (more than 10.000 employees) or in small ones (below 50 employees). Students mainly worked in industry and production (20 percent), consulting, insurance and finance (21 percent), FMCG (14 percent) or IT, media and digital (12 percent).

A descriptive statistical analysis of the data was conducted to answer the three research questions. First, the two data sets (i.e. companies and students/graduates) have been analyzed separately to calculate the frequency of answers on each component and to identify the most utilized assessment instrument and development activity. As the second step, a χ^2 test has been carried, looking for statistical significant differences between the two data sets. Comparisons have been run also gathering data based on the other variables, such as, country, gender, industry, sector, company size, etc.

6. Results

The large majority of respondents (85.5 percent) – both employers and students – indicated an increased emphasis on soft skills over the last five to ten years and the need for managers and academics to devote more attention to soft skills. It confirms the results of the pilot study and the relevance of the topic for practitioners.

Addressing the first research question (*RQ1*), companies were asked, through an open multiple choice question, to indicate which of the following assessment instruments they use in the recruitment process for “testing” soft skills (i.e. case study, observation of group interactions, one-to-one interview, personality test, presentation, role play simulation, video interviews, and the final option was we do not test for soft skills). Percentage of positive answers allows us to create a ranking of the most utilized tools by companies. One-to-one interview is the most common tool utilized during the selection process to evaluate candidates and their soft skills (92 percent), while video interviews do not seem to be replacing them at the moment (3.6 percent). Case study and observation of group interactions are also implemented by more than 40 percent of respondents to test soft skills (Figure 1).

Concerning development methodologies (RQ2), employers were asked to indicate which of the following activities were offered to young graduates by their company (i.e. coaching, feedback and performance appraisal session, formal training and/or workshop, induction seminar, international assignment, mentorship/tutorship activities, special training on the job, and the final option was we do not offer any formal support). A large majority of HR managers indicated feedback and performance appraisal session (80.4 percent) and formal training and/or workshop (78.6 percent) as the principal activity offered to the employee at the beginning of their career path (Figure 2).

Comparing the two samples (RQ3), results show that graduates and managers describe very differently the use of tools to develop graduates' soft skills. The large majority of HR managers indicated they offer formal training to young graduates and that they are involved in the performance appraisal sessions, while only 22 percent of students confirm they receive formal training and only 26 percent declare to be inserted in a performance

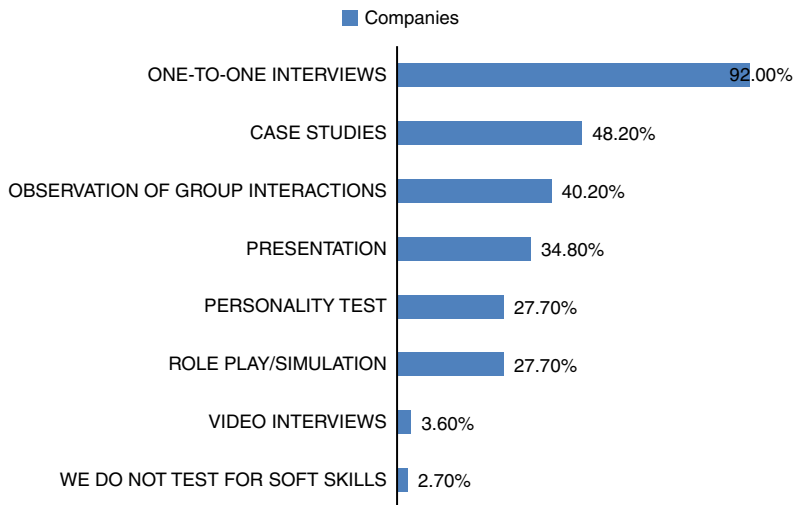


Figure 1.
Ranking of the different assessment instruments based of the percentage of use declared by companies

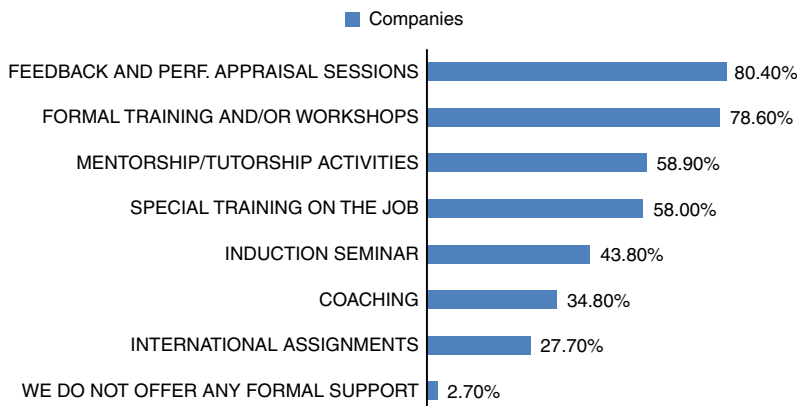


Figure 2.
Ranking of the different activities to develop soft skills based of the percentage of offer declared by companies

appraisal process. Significant differences have been documented on all the activities, providing interesting insights on a clear mismatch between graduates experiences and HR practices (Table II).

Moreover, concerning the assessment of soft skills during the selection process, some significant differences emerged between the two samples and between Italian and German companies. Personality test, for instance, is used by 39 percent of Italian employers and only by 13 percent of German ones.

7. Discussion and further development

This research constitutes the first step to acknowledge the lack of initiatives devoted to soft skills development, despite their rising importance for the job market. Tools and activities utilized to assess and develop soft skills have been deeply investigated, and a better understanding of main practices is offered by the study. Moreover, while previous research has predominantly focused on higher education executives and HR managers, this paper's contribution consists in involving young graduates in the reflection on employability.

Results show a clear difference between the practices declared by employers and the experiences of young graduates. On one side, companies state they propose to new employees a wide range of opportunities to be trained, to receive feedbacks and to be accompanied by mentors and coaches, while, on the other side, graduates indicate a much lower offer provided by companies. Are companies addressing inadequately the huge demand or even making "false promises"? Are graduates expecting too much from companies and not taking the responsibility of their own development?

Future research should investigate further these results in order to gain a better understanding of the reasons causing different perceptions of practices between employers and graduates. For instance, the two groups differ in the level of work experience and tend to belong to a different generation. Moreover, future studies could enlarge the sample through including other student groups, coming from different HEIs, to address the limitations brought by having respondents coming exclusively from one single business school. The point of strength of this study has been also the internationality of the sample, which could even further increased through extending this study to other European or non-European countries.

In conclusion, there are main implications for practitioners working in the field. On one side, employers have to actively participate in developing students', as well as graduates' soft skills; on the other side, academia needs to build stronger partnerships with the industry and work effectively together to guarantee ready-for-the-job graduates. Finally, students and young graduates need to be made aware of their individual responsibility in developing soft skills and in adopting a pro-active role in order to increase their employability.

Table II.
Comparison between
graduates and
employers' answers

	Students (%)	Companies (%)	Pearson χ^2	df	Asymp. Sig. (two sided)
Coaching***	17.40	34.80	10.243	1	0.001
Feedback and perf. appraisal sessions***	26.40	80.40	73.397	1	0.000
Formal training and/or workshops***	22.20	78.60	80.33	1	0.000
Induction seminar***	9.00	43.80	41.385	1	0.000
International assignments***	11.10	27.70	11.537	1	0.001
Mentorship/tutorship activities***	18.80	58.90	43.968	1	0.000
Special training on the job***	12.50	58.00	59.621	1	0.000
We do not offer any formal support**	10.40	2.70	5.771	1	0.016

Notes: Significant indicators: * $n \leq 0.05$; ** $n \leq 0.001$; *** $n \leq 0.0001$

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Corresponding author

Chiara Succi can be contacted at: csucci@escpeurope.eu